NATURE AND THE NON-OBJECTIVE: AN ESSAY CONCERNING FIFTEEN PAINTINGS

by

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss briefly the creative process in relation to the writer's thesis paintings. These non-objective paintings are the artist's expression of the way he feels about life. If art is considered a continuation of nature, then the artist may be seen as the link between nature and art; thus, the content of the paintings becomes an extension of the life process.

The development of the paintings is discussed in relation to source, form, and style. The source of painting is nature as it is the source of all art. As a work of art is a measure of space, so is it form; and as organized relationships between shaped areas in space it makes its own order: form. This order demands a tangible structure, renouncing objective thinking, embracing intuitive feeling. Style is considered in its variable sense, rather than as an absolute; it defines the quality of growth and change in the artist's work.

It is no accident that references and quotations are made almost exclusively to other artists; although the writer feels that speaking is not the painter's forte, still it is the painter who speaks best of painting. The artist acknowledges the importance of the intuitive. He believes that painting, through form, is an extension of life. He welcomes change, knowing that life is in constant motion. He believes that paintings are to be looked at and enjoyed rather than talked about. With the poet, he agrees that:

Nothing can touch a work of art so little as words of criticism; they always turn out to be more or less successful misunderstandings.[1]

In the end only the painting can truthfully speak for the artist.

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[1]Rilke, Rainer Maria, "Letter to a Young Poet," Encore, 8:25, November, 1945, p. 627.

PART I

SOURCE

> ...the creator must be a world in himself and find everything in himself, and in nature of which he has made himself a true part.[1]

In order to make a bridge between the painter and the painting there must be the urge to paint. This germinal force lies within the painter. It is made urgent through the natural images that he sees in space. "Nature" signifies all of the universe as we know it, and live it, and reality as we feel and accept it. The source of all art is nature. The aesthetic form-making sense of the artist takes what he finds in nature and transposes it into art. The artist uses this sense as a means of ordering the feelings he has about nature, and thus distills it into a perceivable object of enjoyment.

From nature, the raw mechanics of the life process in operation, comes the spark to create. Out of nature, which may be a landscape, or spaces between trees, or women on a subway seat, something strikes the artist as new, and asking to be put down. What he sees then he wants to put down to his satisfaction. Before he is able to do this, he must have achieved his own "style" which is forged from observation and hard work, and can come only with time.

The artist brings to the canvas his feelings about the world. His medium is paint. He organizes and arranges what he feels on the canvas.

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[1] Ibid., p. 628.

Through the paint he presents an object for feeling.

He begins, he must begin, with the most personal of urges, submitting himself to the discipline of training, only to grope his way toward the personal essence of the original motivation.

When someone asked Matisse why he painted, he answered:

> To translate my emotions, my feelings and the reactions of my sensibility into color and design, something that neither the most perfect camera, even in colors, nor the cinema can do...I have told my young students: 'You want to paint? First of all you must cut off your tongue because your decision takes away from you the right to express yourself with anything but your brush.'[2]

The answer to the question of why the artist paints is very simple. He paints because he must. That the artist paints instead of speaks is testimony to it.

Subject matter, the artist may feel, should be sublimated to the overall form. To the non-objective painter, as the subject is minimized, the universal becomes more possible. The artist has little choice in selecting his subject matter. It is always what he sees, what he experiences, what he loves, and what he loses. He must always make use of the things around him.

Braque, when asked if some beautiful bouquets of flowers seen in his studio were used as models for his pictures, replied that he did not paint directly from the object, but that the bouquets on his canvases were drawn from the many that he had seen and remembered, that his memory was rich with images that he wished to paint. Later, speaking of the process of creation, he said: "Impregnation is that which comes to us

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[2]Barr, Alfred H., Jr., Matisse His Art and His Public (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1951), p. 562.

unconsciously, which is developed and retained by obsession and which is delivered up one day by creative hallucination."[3]

With the muting of the subject matter, the artist begins to sense that subject matter must be in such harmony and so integrated with the overall form, the whole picture, that it may appear to be absent. Still no painter denies the clearly defined role of subject matter. It was formerly the raison d'etre of some painting, the stimulus which evoked the sentimental response in the eye of the spectator.

In non-objective painting, the artist strips the picture of its external matter, the subject as such, and makes the painting itself the object to be looked at. Gone are the embellishments that fascinate the spectator's intellect, and left are the form, the color, that say to the spectator what the artist felt about his world. When the artist approaches his painting intellectually, putting idea ahead of emotion, trusting intellect over his intuitive, his paintings lose their validity. "Whether he likes it or not," said Picasso, "man is an instrument of nature."[4]

This artist feels that art is an extension of nature, and, just as art is form, so are life and nature form. The complex system of relationships that make up one, makes up the others, and, because of this, paintings must not be a reflection of nature but a continuation of nature. The artist must inject his own pulse beat into the work, so that it becomes completely organic. Art must carry on the life process.

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[3]Hope, Henry R., George Braque (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1949), p. 149.

[4]Barr, Alfred H., Jr., Picasso. Fifty Years of His Art (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p. 273.

PART II

FORM

> No wonder the artist is constantly placing and displacing, relating and rupturing relations: his task is to find a complex of qualities whose feeling is just right - veering toward the unknown and chaos, yet ordered and related in order to be apprehended.[1]

Form is to the artist a highly complex system of relationships. It is not only structure, but conveys also rhythm and meaning, and much that is indefinable.

In beginning a picture the artist does not try to think of what his picture will be. He is aware of the completeness, and the wholeness of form which is simultaneously fleeting, or changing, and undergoing a metamorphasis.

> We feel through the senses and everyone knows that the content of art is feeling; it is the creation of an object for sensing that is the artist's task; and it is the qualities of the object that constitute its felt content.[2]

It is the artist's feeling about the world and his personal experiences that is the motivation for his paintings. A vase of flowers near a bowl of fruit may evoke an aesthetic excitement because of their relationship to each other in space. This relationship starts the form-making machinery into operation. This relationship is form and this form suggests other forms.

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[1] Motherwell, Robert, "Beyond the Aesthetic," Design, 47:8 April, 1946, p. 15.

[2] Ibid., p. 14.

In painting the artist may start with the form suggested and from there develop his picture through the gradual enriching of this one idea. But the initial stimulus may not come from such a direct source. It quite often comes from the deep feelings the artist has stored up from his reactions to life.

Living in the world constitutes the source of art and art is expressed through form. As Focillon says:

> Between nature and man form intervenes. The man in question, the artist, that is, forms this nature; before taking possession of it, he thinks it, feels it, and sees it as form.[3]

This painter sees form in contrasts; in pine trees, dark and linear cutting sharply across the gray or blue sky; in the movements of people against their backgrounds, the super market or the picture window. There is mystery here, too, for the exact beginning of form is outside our grasp. It comes from too deep within us.

Braque believes in the element of intuition and mystery as a part in the creative process. In a recent interview, he said specifically:

> I could not do otherwise than I do. The picture makes itself under the brush. I insist on this point. There must be no preconceived idea. A picture is an adventure each time. When I tackle the white canvas I never know how it will come out. This is the risk that you must take. I never visualize a picture in my mind before starting to paint. On the contrary I believe that a picture is finished only after one has completely effaced the idea that was there at the start.[4]

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[3]Focillon, Henri, The Life of Forms in Art (New York: Whittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948), p. 47.

[4]Hope, op. cit., p. 150.

Every day the painter goes into his studio ready to paint. His mood, the weather, the thoughts that go through his mind, the painting left unfinished from yesterday, all play a part in the work he will do that day. Perhaps he will want to work on a new painting, but his attention is caught by one on which he has been working for a long time, so he leaves the new to consider the old. In looking, he sees that what seemed yesterday to be almost right, today seems not so good. He begins to work. The first strokes or color changes may be deliberate, done in the high good faith that they will solve this problem, but the slightest change of one part necessitates the adjustment of the whole, and the artist finds himself working with mounting speed until rational thought is driven out, and the work becomes an extension of his whole being. At such times any part is sacrificed to the total result. No shape is worth saving if it does not fit the emotion. The paints seem to mix themselves, and the color that is needed suggests itself.

In working this way, the picture takes on the characteristics of emotion, rhythm, color, and form that the artist has felt. When finished, the painting <u>is</u>. It is neither the artist nor a reflection of him. It is a separate form that exists within and outside of time.

If the artist establishes within the picture an essentially life-like relationship, and if the picture is a complete entity, then the spectator can enter the picture. He accepts the invitation and becomes the creator. He discovers an image of his own within the composition. This is the ideal.

The painter does not limit wnat the spectator may see in the picture. If the picture is non-objective, he may withhold the provocation of a title, to give the spectator the privilege and privacy of allowing his unique reaction to call itself forth. Whatever the picture, it is better rid of the literary dressing.

The human mind's eye cries for stimulation, and it is to the form of the painting as the artist sets it down, that the eye of the spectator turns for fulfillment.

PART III

STYLE

> With a small temperament one can be very much a painter. One can do good things without being very much of a harmonist or a colourist. It is sufficient to have a sense of art--and this sense is doubtless the horror of the bourgeois. Therefore, institutions, pensions, honors, can only be made for cretins, rogues, and rascals. Do not be an art critic, but paint; therein lies salvation.[1]

The "sense of art" referred to by Cezanne is synonymous with the writer's use and meaning of "style" in this paper. Style is constantly testing itself, balancing itself, and annihilating itself, unaware of outside opinion. Style in this sense is limited by one law: art springs only from inner necessity.

The term style has two almost opposite meanings: in the generic sense, the word "style" implies superior quality, universality, unchangeably valid; in the other sense, a style is a development, and it is with the latter meaning with its emphasis on the important system of relationships in evolution that the writer concerns himself.

Style in either of its meanings, either of the absolute, or of the variable cannot be sought by the artist. It must come of itself. The artist aims for it only in that he works always toward wholeness, and with Kandinsky believes "that is beautiful which is produced by inner necessity which springs from the soul."[2]

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[1]Cezanne, Paul, Letter to Emile Bernard, AIX, July 25, 1904. Paul Cezanne Letters (John Rewald, editor. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1946), p. 239.

[2]Kandinsky, Wassily, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (New York: Whittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1947), p. 75.

As life itself is apparently accidental, split-up, divided and piecemeal with its order concealed, so is the order of the non-objective painting sometimes concealed. Non-objective, non-figurative painting was born in the artist's search for a free field of self definition.

Perhaps the key to some non-objective painting lies in the theory of metamorphasis, the constant flow and change which we see in all living things around us. The artist strives to incorporate within his painting the sense of flux, the feeling of movement and non-movement, the change and the non-change. The picture is finished when these opposing elements are balanced. When the painting is finished only the painter knows, and this is when a total unity has been achieved. There is nothing which does not lock itself into the plastic paint of the picture.

The total unity which is present when the painting is finished eludes the painter whose personal style has not evolved. Style evolves when the balance struck between technique and feeling becomes uniquely his own. What the artist sees and hears while this is happening may come into the picture, but he is also aware of the recurrence of certain forms and colors which have become assimilated with his whole being. In the emergence of overall form there are present these insistent personal forms. They show themselves consistently through an artist's work. In the work of some artists these forms signify him more readily than his signature.

The style of the painter may evolve in the vigor and sureness of a technique, arriving out of a harmonious relationship between the hand

and the tool and the matter and the form. The hand is an extension of the mind; the brush is an extension of the hand; the touch of the brush shows by its paint traces the activity of the mind.

The "touch" is born of this relationship. It is touch which gives life to the painting, or which holds it back. It comes to the painting when the brush has quickened life on the canvas with the pigment, and it shows itself solid and fixed, existing.

The "touch" is not obvious. It is, indeed, an inseparable entity, making itself known only through the organic sense arising from the way certain values or tones are placed. It is the acute subtlety of touch, that makes it possible to analyze only the behavior of technique, rather than try to discuss it. In the same manner, we can write only of the chronology of execution rather than the genesis of creation.

The technique is the manipulation of the medium through which the artist expresses his feelings. Technique is born of practice and feeling, which may evolve as style. The technique itself is relatively unimportant, except in that through working a system is developed which better facilitates clear expression. Whether the choice is pigment ground in oil, as in the case of this painter, or tempera on board, the artist employs the technique which limits his expression least.

Paint is applied with brush or knife or any implement which will transfer the paint to the canvas.[3]

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[3]Clifford Self, of New York, for example, uses a bread knife, crude house paints, a kitchen sponge in his work, almost arbitrarily avoiding the traditional painter's tools, because he says that these implements interfere with the true flow of his intuition.

For the most part linen canvas on wooden stretchers was used for these pictures. Behlen's Japan colors (which are fluid) and Windsor-Newton oils, to fill out the color range, were employed. The white, Behlen's Titanium, was used in large quantities because of its covering power as well as its brushing quality. Occasionally, in order to achieve a different textural quality of paint, zinc or lead white were used.

It is believed that unity is aided by working with a limited number of colors which are pre-mixed and applied from jars. The flow is different than if they are applied from a flat surface (palette), and in these paintings proved more satisfactory, seeming to work into the effect strived for directly and naturally. A mixture of damar varnish, stand oil, and turpentine in equal parts was used for thinning the paint.

Brushes varying in width up to two and one-half inches were used, with the painter working directly from the can, mixing the paint on the canvas. Generally, one brush was used for each color.

In the paintings, colors alternate between broken and solid to give strength and variety, with one movement swelling against its response to another bank of color. Throughout most of the pictures, the spectator will note gray is used as the background color on which the activity of the pure colors is sustained; the reds, yellows, blues, the blacks, the whites, oranges, green, purple engage themselves as if in battle on a gray field.

The gray space is seen as the negative space, and yet it is the form-making medium, and the controlling element in these paintings. Too, the gray holds the raw, strong masses into place, defines the order

and controls the chaos, which is set up by the pure color vibrating amid the opposition of shapes.

In painting Number 5 the color red and the movement create a tension that is held in the picture only by the gray background. The picture structure is made up of the calm shapes and the explosive shapes which group themselves into larger masses by the slashing line of the background color. As in Number 11 or Number 14, the gray background divides the varied actions into separate parts, the gray, while it has much life, is the calming agent. This is the form maker, the space between the actual masses.

In Number 9 it is not the gray background but a combination of yellows, some soft and light, and some heavy that have superceded it, that becomes the supporter of forms, the setter of mood.

It is the artist's intention that the forms are so placed that they may appear to be on top of a mass, whereas, when joined by the eye to a second mass they may seem to seek the plane at that level.

Or, as in the design on a Celtic bowl, the ornament appears to be shifting among different planes at different speeds. Even though it is fixed and set within compartments, still there is always the sense of overlaying and a constant melting into itself.

There are endless varieties of combinations of forms. The spectator may see, for example, the blacks in Number 7 on one plane or he may see them on two other planes. At one moment, the eye joins one group; then it may join another, taking the first form along with it, so making a continuous process.

Mood plays its part in the creation of a painting. It is the cloth out of which feeling is woven. Combined circumstances conspire to create the mood from which the painting springs. It is plain to see the difference in the mood and pervading atmosphere of Number 14 with its feeling of clear sunlight, and the large Number 3 which is related, yet pervaded by a strong meloncholy. Contrast the gay spring-like mood of Number 13 and the stark almost terror of Number 12. Sometimes in reworking a picture, the mood may be considerably altered, but rarely from one complete extreme to another. For the mood limits the picture and the prevailing mood helps determine, to some extent, the tone of the painting as he begins to change and rework.

To try to express how a painting is conceived is to belie the uniqueness of its creation. To try to explain a color relationship exactly is as impossible as to attempt to explain the nuances of a human relationship. The artist can report how but not why. But all painting has a beginning. It is the first stroke that breaks up the old order, and is the genesis of a new one, which will go through its own evolution of disorder until it is worked to a finish.

Out of the disordered swirling mass comes an order which is held together by the artist's feeling. The theme of the paintings lies in the explosive force in the heart of most of them, whose movement creates chaos. Again the painter's feeling for balance and rhythm, felt rather than thought, works to bring order to this chaos.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this essay has been to clarify the relationship between nature and the non-objective in the creative process of the writer's thesis paintings. Because the paintings are a continuation of nature in that they grow out of what the artist sees, hears, and feels, they are, therefore, a part of the life process, rendered according to the laws of nature.

Believing nature to be the source of all art, the artist who yields himself to her rhythms allows himself liberties only in details, knowing it to be to his advantage to remain en rapport with her and her law of constant change. Thus, the writer has attempted to answer the question of how nature enters the non-figurative painting.

In writing of form the painter trusts the form-seeing eye of the spectator to see for itself that the line which divides one shape from another is the line which unites one mass with another. The painter sees in his own mind's eye arrangements of masses worked out in his own media. He sees what has to come out in form of something to see which has its own texture and shape.

Also, the painter aims for a resolved style, which even when its order is hidden in the unrest of the experimental, helps the painting to achieve unity and coherence.

The writer has aimed to show that the formal aspect of painting while important, is not the most important element in the picture. Content must not be ignored. A non-figurative painting is not the

structural bones of a picture with the addition of subject matter implied. The painting is complete in itself. While the meaning of the painting lies in its relationships, in the shifting and changing of various parts, a black area may stand as a black area in its own right, with no symbolic or metaphoric meanings intended.

In the non-objective painting, the painter aims at the elimination of all extraneous matter, with total emphasis on the painted surface, which needs no figurative subject matter to be a painting with complete content.

However, should the form sense dictate the need for figurative matter, it would reappear, as much a part of the total picture as before it vanished to make way for other emphasis. Such is the way of art.

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